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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 001385

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: MARCH 8 UPDATE

REF: A. BANGKOK 01288 (ETHNO-NATIONALISM AND RELIGION)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 01037 (REALITY ON THE GROUND)

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton. Reason 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. A closer look at three cases of violence in the restive southern provinces during the week of February 25-March 3 highlights several key dynamics in the conflict. The most prominent incident--the deaths of five suspected separatists in a clash with an Army unit on March 2--may also be the first reported case since the surge in violence in January 2004 involving the discovery of a dedicated training ground in the mountainous countryside. End Summary.

MARCH 2 SHOOTOUT

[1](#)2. (C) The most high-profile event in the South last week was a gun battle between Army units and suspected insurgents in an alleged "training camp" in Narathiwat on March 2. While some details remain unclear, local police and press contacts tell us that villagers in Kutong, near Jao Ta Wae mountain in Rangae district, contacted local authorities on March 2 with reports of armed men in the area. An Army patrol of unclear size responded to the tip and made contact with an estimated 15-20 men around 11:00 am in a remote, forested part of the mountain. Following a 30 minute fire-fight, the majority of suspected separatists withdrew, leaving behind blood trails, five dead colleagues dressed all in black, eight national identification cards, two M-16 rifles, a shotgun and ammunition. The Army unit involved reported no casualties. According to the police, those killed were all from Narathiwat and none of them were wanted by the authorities. Police are working to arrest the other three whose ID cards were found at the scene--but, according to their families, these suspects reportedly "moved to Malaysia" for work purposes over a year ago. A single press report suggests that police made an arrest in connection to this case on March 5, without providing additional details.

[1](#)3. (C) While the gunbattle was enough to garner headlines, the suggestion that it occurred in an insurgent "training camp"--the existence of which has been widely rumored in this mountainous, remote area, but never proven--drew wider attention. Almost 300 Army and police personnel moved into the area on March 3, sealing off the base of the mountain and combing the ground for evidence. According to a journalist contact in Narathiwat, the crude "camp" consisted of a small open clearing, basic sleeping quarters for 10 people, and a cooking area. Press reports have suggested that militants there were involved in weapons training and that two of the

three suspected insurgents killed were "instructors." Some press sources have also reported that the two rifles recovered at the scene were originally stolen in the January 2004 armory raid in Narathiwat--making them among the only weapons to reappear from the theft.

14. (C) Initial press reports cited insurgent sources denying any involvement in the fight and claiming that those killed were farmers or illegal loggers. Further press reports, however, indicated that no farming equipment was found on the scene, and that police officials had instead discovered a collection of separatist propaganda and maps detailing the disposition of local security forces. On March 6, local Thai-language press reported that Masae Useng, the purported leader of the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Coordinate (BRN-C) had instructed his followers to kill 60 Buddhists between March 9-20 in retaliation for the deaths of five members on March 2. There was no further explanation how this paper obtained such information from the elusive Masae, who is not prone to issuing such statements.

STUDENT CONVOY ATTACKED--INTENTIONALLY?

15. (C) Garnering slightly less attention in local press was the attack February 28th on a busload of students in Narathiwat. The group of approximately 100 elementary school students--who were traveling with military escort--were returning from a field trip to the Songkhla zoo when they were ambushed by gunmen. Five children were seriously injured. Local officials condemned the attack. The identity of the gunmen remains unclear, and several observers have questioned whether the perpetrators were even aware that

BANGKOK 00001385 002 OF 002

schoolchildren were part of the motorcade.

16. (C) Comment: This, and the recent attack on an adviser to the Queen visiting the South, has inspired some debate on whether the insurgents are expanding their target list. More likely, this and other attacks occurred because militants see police/military convoy as easy targets of opportunity and were likely unaware of the identity of those traveling in the motorcade. End Comment.

MAKING "SOFT" TACTICS WORK

17. (C) While the "normal" raft of shootings and bombings appear to proceed apace in the deep South, there seem to be some indications that the RTG's emphasis on "softer" tactics may be yielding some small benefits, particularly in managing efforts by local mobs to force the release of suspects. Such protests--which continue to occur with alarming frequency--have bedeviled security officials in the South, often blocking arrests or increasing the threat of violent clashes between security forces and locals. Following the gun battle in Narathiwat on March 2, local villagers threatened to block security forces from the scene of the incident, but dispersed after the Narathiwat governor and head of the local Islamic Committee agreed to oversee the transfer and autopsy of the dead. Recent arrests in Yala province last week (including the reported capture of the suspected insurgent who lost his arm in a February 27 attempted bomb attack) also inspired several separate protests, all of which ended peacefully. In one case, local authorities used the newly formed all-female Ranger company to peacefully control and disperse a crowd of 100 Malay-Muslim women protesting an arrest. In a second case last week, police officers worked with local village and district officials to pre-empt a protest by locals after the arrest of several suspects. Finally, on March 5, police in Songkha conducted a series of raids that netted five suspected insurgents--one of the first operations that targeted insurgents residing in separate districts from where they were originally wanted.

